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AUTHOR Goltermann, Glen; Doelker, Richard E., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to deal with the following issues as they relate to educational grading policy: (1) to examine the use and misuse of grades in education; (2) to explore the use of performance based grading versus traditional grading and compare institutions using traditional grading versus those using performance based or non-traditional grading; and (3) to present an argument that normative and traditional grading policy may be adversely affecting the Office of Academic Affairs of the Florida State Board of Regent's affirmative action policy. (Author/DEP)

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THE EFFECT OF TRADITIONAL VERSUS NON-TRADITIONAL GRADING POLICY ON MINORITY SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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Glen Goltermann, MSW
Assistant Professor
Department of Social Welfare
University of West Florida

Richard E. Doelker, Jr., MSW
Assistant Professor
Department of Social Welfare
University of West Florida

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THE EFFECT OF TRADITIONAL VERSUS NON-TRADITIONAL GRADING POLICY ON MINORITY SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

In December of 1974, the Office of Academic Affairs of the Florida State Board of Regents' staff produced a position paper entitled, GRADE TRENDS IN THE STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM OF FLORIDA. The various themes in this paper demonstrated that the body which formulates educational policy for the state of Florida was extremely concerned about rising grades throughout the state. Although the Regents' staff actually did not take a position on grading trends, they did conclude that the trend toward higher grades would continue unless universities recognize this trend as educationally unsound. Further, staff then recommended that: (1) Each university monitor and publish grade trends and (2) each university establish a forum to review and assess the total evaluative process.

In order to demonstrate the validity of concern, the Regents' staff presented the following data:

(1) In seven state universities over a four year period the percentage of students receiving a "C" grade dropped markedly while the combined percentage of "A" and "B" grades increased.

(2) Some members of Arts and Science faculty contend that Business Administration and Education faculties are "soft graders." The data collected indicate that the shift toward higher grades was least pronounced in Business Administration and not in Arts and Science. In education, relatively high grades were given in 1969 and even higher grades were recorded in 1973.

(3) Employers and faculty have complained that many graduates have poor writing skills. (There is an inference at this point in the paper that "social promotions" given in elementary grades and high schools are continuing in universities).

(4) The concept of no-failure, the open university, no final exams, credit for projects outside class, are viewed with alarm by many educators who see the BA degree as being watered down.

(5) There is no evidence that the ability level of Florida students entering the university system is rising.

(6) A large number of "average" students are being admitted into graduate school (The writers are unclear as to how this is inflating grades).

(7) Causes of a trend toward higher grades may be

(a) waiver of final exam, take home exams, etc.

(b) tendency to consider "A" as a proper evaluation of a student who meets course requirements.

(c) the pass-no pass system.

(d) no fail policies.

(e) lack of grading policies on part of faculty and administrators.

(8) Traditional and innovative grading systems are causing conflict in the academic area. (Regents Staff, 1974).

It is interesting to note that while the issues raised are important in educational policy areas, not once did the paper address itself to either the philosophical or pragmatic value of grades, nor did it address itself to grades as a measure of learning (except in area three which will be dealt with in a later section). Although the regents staff developed an interesting and informative document on grade trends and possible causes for high grades, it seems that rather than using this position paper to induce institutions to reproduce grade trends and review the evaluation process, it would seem that there are greater issues at stake than simply a trend toward rising grades.

The purpose of this article is to deal with the following issues as they relate to educational grading policy:

(1) To examine the use and misuse of grades in education

(2) To explore the use of performance based grading versus traditional grading and compare institutions using traditional grading versus those using performance based or non-traditional grading.

(3) To present an argument that normative and traditional grading policy may be adversely affecting the Regent's affirmative action policy.

Educational Issues in the Use and Misuse of Grades

In response to the open ended question asked by the writers of faculty and students, in the department "What are grades for?", both faculty and students thought that we are graded because we live in a "graded" society. They contended that there must be some measure of how well a person performs within society and grades give us some indication of how well a person will do in society. They contended that grades teach us to achieve and "play the game." On the other hand, there was considerable concern by a minority of faculty and students that the games we learn to play through grades may be negative as well as positive.

As was stated in number three of the Regents' staff position paper, mentioned previously, there was concern on the part of faculty that "easy grades" will produce less well educated people in the business or the "real" world. Although this view may well be valid, the writers could find no evidence of higher grades decreasing production within society.

Murray Milner in Illusion of Equality (1972) contends that Socio-Economic Status (SES) is the major factor which helps people achieve success (high grades) in college, in graduate school, and achievement after graduation. Other studies have been done in this area concluding that in business and private professions that aside from the top ten percent of highest

achievers, there was no relationship between GPA and status of occupational firm, but there is a positive relationship between SES of parent and status of place in which employed after graduation.

It would seem that grades are not necessarily a measure of "success." As a matter of fact, SES of parent may have more influence on the success of the student than grades. Our current grading system may perpetuate academic success among the high SES population and latently discriminate against low SES individuals, of which approximately forty-six percent are Black and other minority groups (HEW, 1971). It would seem, therefore, that current traditional grading systems and policy may conflict with affirmative action policy.

William Glasser (1971) contends that grades may be used as a therapeutic tool to help students or may be used as a tool to do them psychological and sociological harm. Grades may have both a positive and negative affect on students depending on how grades are used. It follows that grades must be carefully examined so that they may have a positive affect on all students.

"Are academic standards obsolete?" Nathan Glazer contends that institutions, until a few years ago, distributed grades on ability alone but, those with most ability came from high SES families. Thus grading by ability alone may be discriminatory toward minorities. Moreover, measuring achievement by grades may perpetuate negative practices within the larger society (e.g. dishonesty). There is also a good possibility that academic achievement has almost nothing to do with social functioning. Glazer found serious pragmatic philosophical and ethical questions regarding the validity of our current practice of grading by achievement.

In order to note some of the factors involved in the total grading issue, Goltermann has developed a model which examines the areas needing to be researched by those involved in educational policy.

① Educational Policy Factors

Do current Educational policies whether stated or not stated affect the perpetuation or reduction of the use of "Grade by Achievement?" Which educational policies are negatively or positively influencing the other areas?

② Environmental Factors

Does socio-economic status, class, race, and cultural differentiation affect "Grade by Achievement?"

③ Consumer Factors

Do graduate schools, employers, professionals, employ students strictly on the basis of "Grade by Achievement?" Would alternative grading systems affect this area?

④ Societal Factors

Is "Grade by Achievement" a necessity with a technological society? Does grade by achievement increase societal welfare? Are there alternatives grading systems which may increase society welfare?

Learning Theory Factors

Would increased application of learning theory increase individual and societal opportunity in Areas 2, 3, 4? Is area 1, postively or negatively affecting implementation of learning theory?

By looking at the model and reviewing the preceding literature, one may make certain assumptions about grading by achievement:

(1) That all parts of the model are inter-related and a change in one part will cause movement in the other parts. Movement in several areas may be causing considerable educational concern.

(2) That socioeconomic status has more influence upon the "success" of students than grades. That grading may be "games" both teacher and student play.

(3) That there is considerable question as to whether we should maintain traditional means to measure achievement, due to the possibility that traditional grading may be latently discriminatory.

(4) That grades may be used therapeutically as a positive or negative reinforcement.

It is the writers' position that rising grade trends may be healthy both for individual students, institutions and society. Higher grades may take the pressure from an individual student who, because of various internal and external pressures feels that he has to achieve high grades. If this person can achieve a "B" average which, in reality is average, the person may feel less pressure and stress and therefore be more psychologically stable and less likely to use deviant means to get high grades. Thus rising grade trends may be therapeutic in the sense that they prevent stress and possible mental illness and secondly will not force students to cheat in order to make good grades.

A further benefit of rising grade trends may be that institutions and society will have to re-evaluate the criteria used to admit students into graduate programs or to the world of work. Certainly the state policy of a 3.0 average to be admitted into graduate school will either have to be changed or they will have to develop new criteria for admitting students. It is the writers' opinion that it is time that pressure be put on graduate

schools to deal with more than simply GPA as the primary criteria for admission to graduate programs. Rising GPA's will force graduate schools to do this. The entire world of work will also benefit in a similar manner from rising GPA's.

On the other hand, the writers do not want to get caught in the pro-con issues of rising GPA's. The real question that policy-makers should be asking is "to what extent do current grading systems reflect learning?" Learning, not grade point average, is the issue needed to be dealt with if one is to have a credible educational institution. At the risk of stating the obvious, an "F" does not necessarily reflect non-learning, nor does an "A" reflect learning. Institutions need to develop teaching and grading modalities which will give the opportunity to all students, not just the ones from more advantaged backgrounds. Current methods may be meeting more of the teacher's needs rather than those of the student. Further, current grading methods may be perpetuating inequality and the status quo. It is the writers' conclusion that state education policy makers should direct research into the areas of ways and means to increase and measure learning among the entire student population.

Non-Traditional Grading Systems

Non-traditional grading systems primarily take two forms; the pass-fail form, or the performance based form. Many of these programs are developed within a department or school of the university rather than being policy statements of the total university.

A. Pass-Fail

1. The School of Social Work at The University of Minnesota is now considering a pass-fail system (1972). The policy has not been solidified yet because it was the conclusion of the committee that more research needs to be done on student learning outcomes before

a rational decision can be made.

2. The School of Social Service Administration at Arizona State University implemented a Credit No-Credit policy which incorporates a criteria-based grading system as noted below.

> GSSSA is a graduate school offering preparation for the profession of social work. The educational opportunities provided enable students to attain competence appropriate to an entry level of fully professional practice. Mastery of a set of basic concepts and core knowledge is essential before the MSW degree is granted, and the purpose of the grading system is to signify whether or not the level of mastery has been reached.
>
> It is the policy of this School that the grade entered on a student's official record indicates whether or not the student's performance meets the standard of mastery for that course. There are many things that a grade cannot appropriately measure: effort, cooperativeness, quantity of output, personal or professional growth, sincerity, motivation, personal integrity. While these are all important aspects of learning which should be appropriately evaluated by instructors, their evaluation should be used to aid in the educational process and be kept distinct from evaluations of the product of that process, which is represented by the semester grade.
>
> While instructors are free to follow their own procedures in arriving at semester grades, it is necessary that evaluative criteria and grading procedures be consonant with this policy and be clearly explicated. Each instructor will be responsible for formulating course objectives and expectations, and for presenting the criteria for mastery to students.

B. Criteria Based Grading

1. The University of Alabama's "New College" is a non-traditional university without rolls concept in which they use contracting for grades. It cannot be positively stated from the catalog that the New College, even though it uses a contract to determine grades, employs the use of criteria based grading.

2. As was stated in Section A, the school of Social Service Administration uses criteria based grading (See policy Section A2).

3. The Cronicle of Higher Education (March, 1975) has listed several schools using:

Bowling Green State University, which has already adopted a "competency-oriented curriculum" for undergraduates, plans to certify "an individual's general education requirements in terms of competency-based criteria."

The university has organized two agencies - a division of general studies and a center for competency-based undergraduate education - that will seek to "define the general life skills needed by an individual..." and to "formulate set of curricular options that would constitute alternative discrete tracks for fulfilling general education requirements."

Brigham Young University also is developing a competency-based program. The university will create a general education council that will develop alternative means of evaluating student accomplishment.

All students entering the university after January, 1976, will complete "evaluations" rather than enroll in courses. Credit will be awarded as students complete various evaluations.

Governors State University in Illinois, an upper-division institution for commuting students, plans to develop a competency-based program of liberal education for older students who see college primarily as a means of enhancing their careers.

The college plans to revise its selection of faculty members and develop new programs to train faculty members and assess their performance.

Mendocino College, a public two-year institution in California, plans to develop a year-long, problem-oriented program for entering freshmen. The program has identified 17 "knowledge" goals and 22 "skills and abilities" goals that the freshmen should gain.

4. Probably the most well known practitioner of criteria based grading is done at Alverno College in Wisconsin. Alverno's policies and issues were stated in the Cronicle of Higher Education. (February, 1975).

To be graduated by Alverno College, a student needs neither grades nor credit hours. Rather, she must amass 40 "competence-level units" that, the college says, will indicate how well she can perform the tasks of which every educated person should be capable. The student does not receive grades nor does he get credit for work completed.

There exist many programs throughout the United States which have adopted, at least in part, criteria based grading systems. Obviously these adoptions came about for a reason. It is well known that institutions are resistent to change. It is also well known that individuals tend to be resistent to change. Why then did these institutions implement the use of criteria based grading? To answer fully would take another major paper. Instead, the writers will give a short outline as to why criteria based grading may be appropriate for student learning as a complement to grades.

H. Criteria Based Grading versus Norm Based Grading

Until quite recently there has been little integration of the disciplines of Psychology and Education. There has been little use of applied theories of learning in the classroom. It is the belief of the writers that educators and psychologists can learn much from each other. There is a great deal of resistence on the part of educators to implement theories of learning, particularly stated behavioral objectives, because educators believe they would product technicians rather than educated people. Most educators use "intuitive" means to educate students. A problem with using intuition to teach and grade students is that we may inadvertantly reinforce negative learning among students.

Without going into great detail, an overview will be developed of arguments for the use of criteria based grading (CBG) rather than norm based grading (NBG).

"Mastery learning (CBG) is both a philosophy about schooling and an associated set of instructional strageties whereby the philosophy can be implemented in the classroom. This philosophy asserts that under appropriate conditions all students can and will learn well most of what they are taught." (Block, 1973)

The use of CBG is in direct conflict with the use of NBG. The use of NBG

entails that the teacher assumes a certain percent of students will achieve A, B, C, D, F. The grades are given in the form of a bell curve whereby "C" is average. There are several serious erroneous assumptions in the use of this form of grading. Firstly, it is assumed that all students enter the classroom with same preparations as students who have previously taken the course. In fact this is an erroneous assumption but the assumption still must be made because the nature of (NBG) must assume this because students are graded in comparison to each other rather than content criteria. Secondly, NBG assumes that there will be a wide distribution of learning, that is, in a given course only a few can achieve A, or only a few will achieve F. Obviously, this too is an erroneous assumption.

Instructors sometimes play other games with students.

B. R. Bugelski (1971) calls the games the "educational mistique" in which the professor is the authority and the only one who knows what the course is about. The teacher plays the game "guess what I will ask on the exam," and "guess what will be an acceptable answer." The amount of energy expended by the student trying to "psyche-out" the professor could be more profitably spent in the meeting expectations clearly understood by the student and instructor.

Learning can be defined as a relatively permanent change in behavior that is a result of practice (Flynn, 1973). B. F. Skinner (1968) notes we (1) learn by doing, (2) we learn from experience, and (3) we learn by trial and error. The first, learning by doing, emphasizes the response. The second, learning from experience, emphasizes the occasion upon which the response occurs; and finally, the emphasis in learning by trial and error is on the consequences. Skinner sees teaching as arranging or managing the relations between "doing" behavior on the one hand and the consequences of that behavior on the other. Thus the general objective of instruction would seem to be to teach the student to perform in some situation. An instructional

technology would emphasize performance. This is the important contribution of behavioral objectives; they specify responses. Because responses are important the student should respond in such a way that the instructor can observe and assess whether or not he had learned the specified behavior. This is the purpose of testing and evaluation (Flynn, 1973).

III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Stated policy is a manifestation of our values. But two types of policy exist. The first type is policy which is written and covert. The second type is "policy" developed by tradition. Both types exist in grading procedures and issues dealt with in this paper. We, the world of academia, highly value academic freedom, justice, and equality of opportunity. These values are reflected in manifest institutional policy. The writers believe that every committed academician should strive to adhere to these policies. A problem arises, however, when there is a conflict between the value of academic freedom versus the values of justice and equality of opportunity. Certainly no instructor is purposely unjust or discriminatory in terms of equality of opportunity. But in the majority of cases on many campuses across the country, traditional grading policy, a manifestation of academic freedom, may be latently discriminatory and/or decrease equality of opportunity. Thus, we have a situation in which an appropriate value, academic freedom, may adversely affect other values, justice and equality of opportunity. The arguments that this is occuring are given in the body of this paper. We have found that socio-economic status has more to do with higher grades and achievement than any other factor. That normative grading may be used as a tool to screen out the "poor" students. Thus, conflicts exist between academic freedom policy and affirmative action policy. We have seen that if one comes from a high SES background, he is likely to receive higher grades.

This causes problems with the value of justice. We have seen that some instructors play games with students making them "guess" the objectives of the course, test questions, etc. This practice also may be to some degree affected by the value of justice.

The purpose of this paper is not to argue for the use of criteria based grading over normative grading. The purpose is to argue for a philosophy of education which contends that institutions must strive for more effective means to teach students, to increase opportunity for students when they enter the larger society, and to decrease psychological stress when learning can take place without it. Emphasis should not be on grades, for we have seen that rising grade trends may actually be beneficial. We must strive for well-educated citizens, and we must also strive to close the gap between the type of education a high income person receives and the type the low income person receives. We must build into our grading systems every possible means to be just toward all students. It is therefore recommended:

(1) That instructors be given the opportunity to learn alternative means to measure student achievement using theories of learning as a base. This seems important as a type of inservice training project which could be given by professors of education to professors in other disciplines.

(2) That the University System take steps to begin experimental programs in education using other state programs as a model. This would give students the freedom to choose the type of learning which best suits him. Thus, if a student feels more comfortable with criteria based learning rather than normative grading, said student will have the choice.

(3) There needs to be a great deal of self-evaluation by policy makers in institutions as to what learning experiences the students

will have. Again, because policy is a reflection of individual and institutional values. The values of the individual and institution will be instilled in the student who will in turn become a determining factor in the values which are cherished in our society.

A great number of words have been used to develop arguments which may be obvious to some members of the academic community. Although the issues may be clear, the problems remain. It is time we in higher education begin to deal with our positions of educational policy and how policy may be decreasing the general welfare of students and state.

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